

## Civil Rights Litigation Clearinghouse: Oral History Project

### Interview with Attorney Yasmin Cader Conducted by Michigan Law 2L Ku'Juana Quinn

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[Interview: [https://www.mivideo.it.umich.edu/media/t/1\\_v5oma41t](https://www.mivideo.it.umich.edu/media/t/1_v5oma41t)]

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** My name is Ku'Juana Quinn and I'm a second-year law student at the University of Michigan Law School. Today, I'm interviewing Yasmin Cader, Deputy Legal Director of the National ACLU and Director of the Trone Center for Justice and Equality, as a part of the Civil Rights Litigation Clearinghouse's Oral History Project. This project collects stories, experiences from lawyers who've litigated landmark civil rights lawsuits. Today is April 10, 2026, and this interview is being conducted virtually. I am in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Ms. Cader is in Los Angeles, California. Thank you, Ms. Cader, for joining me today, and we're going to get started with some background questions.

**[Yasmin Cader]** Perfect. Thank you.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Yes. So looking back at your childhood and early life, what experiences most shaped your path to becoming a lawyer, and more specifically, a civil rights lawyer?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I'll start from early days, and I will say that I grew up in a very nurturing community in St. Paul, Minnesota, that was part of a close-knit Twin Cities effort within the Black community to ensure that we had community, that we were centering the issues that a lot of people faced that were challenges, but also very much celebrating the parts of our culture that were really unique. I was also raised by my mother and my grandmother, and my mother was a journalist and someone very, very committed to issues of social justice in her role as a newspaper reporter and just as a member of that community as well. And then my grandmother was a woman of a lot of moral integrity who had over the dining room table in her house, she had a very famous picture called Christ of the Breadlines. And it was from the era around the Depression, depicting men in a bread line and in the middle of the men was Jesus Christ to symbolize that he is in all of us and that we are all important and valuable. And that meant a lot to me sitting under that picture growing up, just kind of really instilling into me the values of the Sermon on the Mount of those who are hungry or feed those who are hungry, visit those who are in prison. And the combination of those three factors of my grandmother's influence, my mother's, you know, activism, and she's quite the civil libertarian and social justice person. And then the community that really embraced me and raised me as well. Those three things together influenced me very much.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Amazing. Thank you. We also know that you attended Howard University for undergrad and Yale Law School. How is attending both an HBCU and a PWI impactful in shaping your understanding of democracy, opportunity and the rule of law?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Oh, what a great question. Well, I'm going to start chronologically at Howard University. And it was just an extraordinary education to have. You know, you're walking in the same footsteps as the people who have fought for some of the most important tenets of our democracy in this country. I mean, I studied in the same room where Thurgood Marshall and Charles Hamilton Houston created, along with many others, the road to Brown. And of those others, we know the influence of Pauli Murray, who was also a Howard grad. I took my classes in Frederick Douglass Hall, but I didn't just take my classes there. I had classes where we were focused on political theory and focused on political science. I had a class on pan-Africanism, a class on black presidential politics from the extraordinary Dr. Ron Walters. You know, it just was an immersion into the legacy of those who have fought for freedom for both black people, but also laid the foundation of freedom for everyone and believed in those tenants. I had a class in college where we compared Machiavelli's The Prince, to King's Letter From a Birmingham Jail. That was our final. So I was really blessed to have that experience and that background and that, you know, just watering, I would say, of both my intellectual curiosity as well as the principles that I was really, that were a continuation of what my community instilled in me in high school of don't forget where you came from. right, and have purpose and make the world a better place. **[05:00]** And one thing I like to say about Howard is the best analogy that I can think of, of what it's like to have people investing in you who believe that you can be more than you think you can. It's almost like having someone's hand in your back gently pushing you forward all the time. And so that is what Howard University gave to me. I would say that Yale Law School was another extraordinary experience with some of the most brilliant legal minds. And again, professors investing in all of us who are there. I learned very much the difference and the contrast of at Howard you weren't centering race it was instead in the background. Whereas at Yale, there were times, many times, when we would need to have a focus on race that wouldn't have otherwise been there in terms of race of marginalized people, because the backdrop was one of the majority. But it was an extraordinary experience. It made me tough in a different way. And it also gave me lifelong connections with people from a variety of backgrounds that I hadn't necessarily been exposed to at Howard, which is fantastic and wonderful. And I'm grateful to have had both of those educations.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Beautiful. That's, you explained that such a beautiful way. Thank you.

**[Yasmin Cader]** Thank you.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** During law school too, I know that you worked at a civil rights law firm in Charlotte, North Carolina. You handled educational rights in disparate impact cases. How did that work early in your career, early in your legal career, I should say, connect to your personal experiences in your emerging theory of change and how that looked like in the legal system?

**[Yasmin Cader]** So starting with law school?

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Yes.

**[Yasmin Cader]** Okay.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Presumably in your internship with the firm.

**[Yasmin Cader]** Yeah. So that was one of the greatest experiences I ever could have had. And I think it's interesting how it got the job too. It was very early in my first year and we had at Yale a Black alumni program where Black alumni came and met with students. And I met and was introduced to Mel Watt, who is a very famous politician, but also an extraordinary civil rights leader and civil rights lawyer. And when I met him, we got into this great conversation. And it was one of the greatest job interviews I ever had where he's like, I like your energy. You should come work with me this summer. And I said, OK. And that was the deal. So I did. And I had two experiences that summer. That was the first one. And I drove down to Charlotte and I shared an apartment with two other interns. And we had like pallets on the floor because we were only there for a short time. And I got to work under legends and giants in the civil rights field from Geraldine Sumter, Fergie, we called him James Ferguson, Henderson Hill. It was an extraordinary experience, both in terms of the atmosphere and the collaboration and the energy and standing on the shoulders of those who had litigated some of the most important cases that we had from the defense of Daryl Gant to the defense of the Wilmington Ten to *Griggs v. Duke Power* to *Swann v. Mecklenburg*. I mean, all of these seminal matters. And then also just have them invest in me as a person. And again, really see me and believe in me. And I will never forget 4th of July being there and having eaten too much. We ate a lot at the firm. But then we went up on the roof to watch the fireworks and Fergie read Frederick Douglass's 4th of July speech. And that was my job. So it was incredible. And I left there to spend the second half of my summer at the public defender service in the District of Columbia, working with again, lions on the frontline of justice, including Kimberly Taylor-Thompson and the infamous Angela Davis of that era and then, Sharon Stiles. And so it was, it was, incredible. And I will just say about, for example, Kim, I mean, she was one of the most extraordinary lawyers I've ever seen in my life. And she was someone I was in such awe of, but yet she was really approachable. And she saw something in me that made me feel very special. And she wrote my letter of recommendation for my clerkship and my judge, I remember him reading part of it and it said, that I had extraordinary judgment. And I think about that all the time. I'm like 50, almost 59 years old next month. And I think about all the time, the investment **[10:00]** that Kim put into me. she was just an extraordinary, extraordinary, mentor as were the others. And so I feel very grateful.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Wow. As you mentioned, those are two very incredible experiences. And for you to have them in one summer when some people don't even have them in a lifetime is amazing. Speaking of, you mentioned it a little bit earlier, but speaking of incredible experiences, you clerked for Judge Damon Keith of the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals and whose chambers you had mentioned have been shaped by so many prominent figures in civil rights law. What did you learn or what are some things I should say you learned in that environment about the court's role in protecting democracy, racial justice and civil rights?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well the thing about being a Keith Clerk is that there's three things that are going to be a very important part of your experience. One, you're going to be trained to the highest of standards in your legal writing and research and analysis. Two, you're going to be

invested in by not just the judge, but by the entire clerk family. And then three, the judge really taught us about the importance of not just staying in chambers, but being an active and contributing member of our community. And that was the extraordinary city of Detroit, Michigan. And so I learned those particular values in that context. But in terms of the values of our constitutional democracy, I mean, Judge Keith is the one who stood up for so many principles. The famous quote, democracy dies in darkness, that comes from one of his opinions when he was talking about the importance of ensuring that executive action was made public. He also famously wrote so many dissents to the sentencing guidelines, and I helped him with that shaping of that really important role of being a dissenting judge to lay the groundwork later for change. Judge Keith believed so strongly in our civil rights and civil liberties that it really was just infused in all of the analysis of the law that he gave us the privilege of helping him with.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** If you don't mind, could you explain a little bit more about the times, the instances in which you all were able to write dissents to the sentencing guidelines?

**[Yasmin Cader]** It was often because there were often times when people were facing the extraordinary sentences that were a result of mandatory minimums and include in other types of just provisions with the sentencing guidelines that really helped fuel mass incarceration. So that was something that the judge felt fundamentally was taking discretion away from the lower court judges, was draconian and inconsistent with the principles of sentencing in the sentencing code. So it was a principle that he believed in very firmly and that we helped him execute.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Wow, that's so cool. I'm in the Schlanger seminar, which focuses on U.S. prison systems. So I thought that would be really interesting to talk about. So I'm glad you had that experience. Moving a little bit into career highlights now, even though you've had plenty, but I'm going to ask you, which we can talk about a few of them. So you've been rather you've had a rather extensive career. And so I'd love to dive into that. So in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, you handled disparate impact cases. Can you tell me more about that work and how that looked?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Sure. I was with the Employment Litigation Section of the Civil Rights Division, and we focused on disparate impact and disparate treatment cases in states and municipalities where there were concerns of violation of Title VII. And so we did investigations into both claims of disparate treatment, individual claims of discrimination, as well as the systemic harm of disparate impact discrimination. Both, we looked at a lot of hiring practices in fire departments and the police departments, as well as other incidents with states and municipalities. So that was the work that I did there. And I had extraordinary mentors, Phil Eure, Bob Libman, one of my favorite people in the world, who to this day, I consider just a thought partner and mentor and someone for whom I have a great deal of affection. And it was just, there were icons of the civil rights movement and in law **[15:00]** who were there with me, Leslie Annexstein, Todd Cox, he was over in voting we were all in there together, Roy Austin, really famous names of people where we were young lawyers cutting our teeth and really working hard to uphold principles of civil rights through the lens of the United States.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Amazing. And for you, I don't know if this had changed. You talk a little bit about your childhood and how you already kind of grew up knowing that you were one to fight

for justice and advocate for those who didn't have the same level of opportunity to have their voice heard. So kind of in that time where you were in that career setting, how did exclusion from opportunity connect to you as a means to help serve the community? So basically, like, how did employment with more direct access to hiring, promotion, and representation connect to dignity for you?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I think that systemic discrimination is a monster. And it occurs in so many different ways, from housing discrimination to employment discrimination, to the discrimination that comes from the embedded racism in the criminal legal system, transportation discrimination, in city design and methods of transportation, which the infamous Deborah Archer who was also a Yale Law School grad has really exposed in just beautiful important ways all of these systems work together to create an infrastructure of a lack of opportunity and so dismantling that infrastructure to build a structure of opportunity is quite a task, but they interweave, they connect with each other, and it's just really important that we disassemble them, each one separately, but with being mindful of how they interact with each other.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** That's great. Thank you. You also served as a public defender, as you mentioned, you interned there, but you also served as a public defender in D.C., New York, and L.A. during the War on Drugs and post 9-11 period, and also the first Trump administration. So quite a lot there. But what did it mean to you during that time to defend constitutional rights in public defense, in the public defense context during these eras?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Oh, my goodness. It meant so much. I must say that being a public defender is being a champion of liberty, and a protector of our fundamental constitutional freedoms, but also a warrior for democracy. And it was something that I thought I would do for a couple of years, you know, as I had done other things for a couple of years, and I looked up and 23 years passed. So it was very much the bulk of my career and every day was fantastic. It was such a privilege and an honor to meet people at some of the most vulnerable times of their lives and to see in them their humanity and just by the nature of that, what they deserve under our constitution and provide that, meaning a zealous defense, full stop. And so it just entrenched in me a deep respect for our constitutional principles, our civil rights and our civil liberties, and the importance of those principles standing firm, regardless of what someone was accused of or who they were, who people perceive them to be. It instilled in me a real close view of the ways that historic discrimination and that systemic discrimination finds its way into the criminal legal system and then intersects, as I said, with all these other systems of discrimination. And it entrenched in me, I would say, a deep understanding of why our founders privileged the Fourth Amendment and the Fifth Amendment and the Sixth Amendment because of the belief in humanity. That's what those are about. They're about the belief in the enlightenment principles and the value of humanity. And so having the privilege and the honor to find the good in people and to stand up for their rights, regardless of who they are is just truly one of the greatest jobs a lawyer could ever have. And it instills in you a deep respect for our democratic principles **[20:00]** and our constitutional democracy.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Beautiful. Yeah. You kind of elaborated on it a little bit here in this response. This is great. But feel free to add more or anything else you want to add. But I kind of want to ask, how did these experiences deepen your perspective on democracy beyond a specific

case? You kind of spoke on it. And so if you also want to speak about a specific case that kind of opened your eyes, you can also do that as well.

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I think that one of the other principles of I don't know the importance of standing up for those rights was what they embody is a deep respect for humanity and also a belief in people and redemption. And the concept that, you know, Bryan Stevenson has so famously taught us that we are so much more than our mistakes. So just on a human level, I've seen people at some of their lowest times operate with the most extraordinary grace that one could imagine to even just if I'm visiting someone who is incarcerated, who is looking at, you know, their liberty being taken away. and they come down and they speak to me and take the time to combat the fear and depression that they are facing and meet with me and do their best to give me as much information as I can and give me the opportunity to earn their trust, that's grace personified. And that happened to me over and over and over again with my clients for 23 years. So what that does is it makes the principles of constitutional democracy come alive, to see how they operate when you are able to put them in application to the most vulnerable. It also was quite a view into how the inequities in the system, despite these principles, in terms of the way people were treated in court, given roughshod over their rights, dehumanization, the narrowing of Fourth Amendment protections, the cynical view of Fifth Amendment protections. So it also, while it instills deep respect, it also makes you quite the warrior for continuing to battle for justice when injustice prevails.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Moving on to your specific work on the *United States v. City of Torrance* case from 1993. In this case, you represented a plaintiff in the DOJ employment discrimination lawsuit against the City of Torrance, alleging that its fire department's recruitment, testing, and promotion practices had disparate impact on women and minorities in violation of Title VII. Can you tell me a little bit more about this case and your work on that specifically?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, one of the things that was so interesting about that litigation was just the fact that, the discrimination was pretty abundant and the evidence was very strong. But it really taught me the amount of work that it takes to take some factual scenario and have it apply to the law and have the court see it and so I worked on, it was a case that went on for a long time I worked on it for a period of that time but during the time that I was there I was able to be very engaged in depositions. My very first deposition was there it was really contentious and it really helped build up my skill and my strength for the rest of my litigation career. I had extraordinary mentorship in that case. I had my very first meaningful argument in defeating a motion for summary judgment. So it was quite a great fertile training ground for a young lawyer.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Great. You mentioned these experiences. And I was also wondering, too, what lessons, if you don't mind telling a couple of stories, if, you know, if you want to kind of reminisce on that. But what lessons did you learn early on in those, like, the first deposition and your first motion and things of that sort?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Yes. Preparation is everything. And so I learned in that and then also, of course, as a public defender that, you know, when you have high stakes work to do and in court, either through written advocacy or oral advocacy, sometimes when you are new and you are green, you and you feel this, you have a lot of responsibility in your hands. You can feel that

you're just not suited to do it there's people with experience we're just going to do it better but what I learned was that yes there were people with experience that I needed to learn from, [25:00] but no one could outwork me and no one could out-prepare me and then I needed to find with that work with that prep with that help from those who went before me who had so much to give I could bring my own magic. And so that was something that was really important for me to learn early on was that I wasn't just an understudy that didn't have something unique to bring. With the prep, with the grit, with the determination, with the humility to ask for help, it put me in a position where I was able to bring something unique that only I could bring.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** I love that. As you kind of said just now, with no amount of history can defeat preparation and I'm assuming that kind of changes your trajectory of the ways in which you kind of approached this case and probably beyond your career. Is there any points of advice that you would give to those who are segueing into the field they haven't had their first deposition yet you know, retroactively give that advice to yourself?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Sure, yeah, I love that I think that what I would say is that it does, there's no, there's no replacing preparation, but it's also really important to have a mindset of, belief, belief in the shoulders you're standing on, belief in your clients and belief in yourself as an agent of change. Some would call that positive thinking, but I think more of it is faith and belief. And that if you're standing on that, it can be the most intimidating and scary and unknown situation that you're walking into. But if you believe and look at yourself through the eyes of those who are pushing you along, you look at yourself through their eyes, you can save emotional energy that can be spent towards self-doubt and can be spent towards, combating so-called imposter syndrome. You know, if you kind of look at that and instead of entertaining it, just say, I know you're there. I don't have time for you right now. I need to go with those who believe in me and my belief in myself and my preparation and hard work, and then let's go so that would be I think I spent more time than I wish in self-doubt and that isn't the same as ensuring that you always approach the work with humility. Humility and grace is key at every step but you can be humble and confident at the same time.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Yeah, yeah, that's great I definitely internalize that so thank you and then one more question kind of about this case as well, just jumping back to the City of Torrance, but, as we talked about, this case centered on hiring and promotion within the public safety department. Why is it so important to reform these employment systems and how could they potentially connect to our prison industrial complex or things of that sort? How is it all intersectional as we talked about before in terms of racial justice, civil rights, all in the same vein?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I like your question because it's kind of, I think you have a vision for what that could be as well. But particularly when it comes to public safety, having people from the communities that they are dedicated to serving is really important just for credibility, for understanding the, if it's not the individual people in the community, the needs of that community, it matters. It's also really important to look at these as vital entries to employment for so many people. The requirements we certainly argue in the context of policing, we want people to be very well educated. We want people to be well trained. The more education, there's so many studies that talk about the correlation between education and positive outcomes that do

not involve discrimination and that do not involve violence and unnecessary violence. So we want that, but we also want there to be opportunities for employment for people. So in fire safety, those are good jobs and we want them to be open to, we want them to be open to everybody.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Yes. Great. At any point, which I believe you did, honestly, but at any point did it occur to you or occur to others on your team that you kind of helped realize that it was more than just one case here that you're working on or a subset of people in the city, but you were kind of advocating for national level reform to an extent.

**[Yasmin Cader]** Yes. And that's what happens whenever you're looking at **[30:00]** impact litigation is that you're thinking long and hard about a number of different factors, the needs of that community, certainly, but also where are you litigating and what is the opportunity to build precedent that could be exported elsewhere for doctrinal change and wins. You know, impact is measured in lots of different ways. And it's very, you know, situation dependent, you can have short term wins, you can have long term wins that include integrated advocacy that enables you to lay the groundwork for policy change, for narrative change, all of these things work seamlessly together. And it's not a comp, it's not an easily like cut and paste solution. It's very dependent on the context, but measuring impact I think is really important when you're thinking about your theory of change and how you're going to achieve it.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Yeah, that's perfectly said. Going off of that same vein too, in this specific case, or we can talk about a different case as well. What were some of the, I guess, not, I wouldn't say laying like the steps necessarily, because everything can be different each time, but what were some of the, I guess, key phases you had to go in, go through to get to a level of reform or that short-term, long-term impact that you're looking to see?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I think it depends on, it's very dependent on what it is that you're trying to achieve, but one of the most important parts of, I think, impact litigation is first and foremost, in earning the trust and identifying what are the community's priorities, right? What are their goals? What do people want to achieve? And how can you coordinate what you as a lawyer and the impact litigator want to achieve that is centering that goal of the community. And so, it doesn't mean that there aren't times when you bring a facial challenge to an unconstitutional statute on your own, because you've identified looking at the map, I need to do this here. But it does mean when you are in, the type of Title VII, longer term, building up disparate impact cases, that you're really cognizant of what that community is seeking and what they want and what they need. And so that you're going after industries that are the ones that are doing the most damage, and that reform would have the most relief. So I think it's really, that's one of the real philosophies around impact litigation.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Okay, now we're going to move on a little bit more into representation and human impact and some of your work there. So you have, I know we talked previously and you mentioned that you represented juveniles and individuals such as Halim Flowers. What does meaningful legal representation provide to someone who has been excluded from opportunity or harmed by the system? And then also, if you care to explain a little bit more about your connection, go ahead and do that too.

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I think first and foremost, one of the most important parts of representing people, being a lawyer for a client, is taking the skill that you have and the access that you have to justice and to understanding the law and giving it to a person who is facing either discrimination or they're facing the loss of liberty, they're in a vulnerable moment. So you are an agent of access to justice. I think that what that means is we all want to win. You want the relief sought. But along the way, there's so, so much to be gained from ensuring that people are treated the way they should through the course of that matter. So what are their priorities? What matters to them? You might go in with your idea of what it is. But if you're not listening, you're not doing your job. You know, oftentimes I had clients who I was going in and my first thing was like, I got to get you bail. I need the factors so that I can go out and I can argue bail. And they were like, wait a second. The most important thing to me right now is I need somebody to pick up my kids. Can you please call somebody to pick up my kids? Or can you call my boss? Because I'm not going to be there and I can't leave them hanging without notice. You know, so it's not about you. It's about your client and what their priorities and needs are. And so that is, I think, a real important part of client-centered advocacy. And then along the way, ensuring that you are doing what your client wants. Again, the bail example, if a client understands the risks of going to trial and wants to rock and roll and do it anyway, you're there for them. If a client says **[35:00]** that they believe that resolving the case short of trial through a plea is what they want, then you are there for them. It isn't about you. And there's something really empowering and purpose-driven and liberating about that, being an advocate for someone else.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** That's well said too. You kind of answered this in a way as well, but of course, if you would like to make the more distinct connection, more than welcome to. But how does the individual representation connect back to your broader commitment to structural reform? So more accurately kind of saying, like, how do people reconcile this idea of direct services versus impact litigation? How do you meet in the middle there? And how do you make sure both needs are being met at the same time?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I will say from the perspective of public defense, when you collectively have public defenders working at their highest level in well-resourced offices where they are being trained well and they are able to bring a collective action standard of defense to a community, that is impact litigation because you're raising the bar of what justice should be. And it matters not just in terms of what you're able to do in an individual case, but the arguments you're able to make consistently with that preparation and with that sharing of information that can be, if it's appropriate for the case and you're doing it several times in a day, eventually you can change the law, you know? And so you can set precedent and you can make advances. So I think sometimes people feel that individual representation is just one person at a time and somehow that's less impactful because you can't have systemic change. But I disagree for many reasons, for the one I just said, but also the impact you have of providing one individual with the rights that they deserve and thinking about them as emanating out into the greater world. The rights of one means others know what the standard should be. It means people see and can have trust in the system if you are able to achieve that goal. And it can go on, and it can go on, it can go on. And if you are able to liberate people and give them opportunity. You know, one win leads to another, could lead to employment, could lead to greater, you know, care for children. It is just an upward spiral. So we are all as human beings connected, connected with each other and

our collective, our collective gains are those that emanate out, and bring up the society as a whole.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** As you spoke on this, through the duration of our interview, you've had many pivotal moments that brought you where you are today. And I know we talked about you working as a public defender during these pivotal moments in history, but I kind of want to draw us back to today. So how does your current role as Deputy Legal Director of the American Civil Liberties Union and Director of its Trone Center for Justice and Equality fit in with your overall career trajectory or you can also explain to us if that was something that you didn't necessarily plan for, but it was an opportunity that opened and you were able to make use of that.

**[Yasmin Cader]** I think it's the latter. And I will say I have been very fortunate in my career that the main guiding principle for me has been to follow my heart and do the thing that I love. And that that has ended me in the positions that I have, but not with a lot of planning. And so in between the public defender work and the work I have that I do with ACLU, I founded a litigation practice with a former law school classmate. And we were having a thriving firm when I got a call out of the blue from a mentor that said, Anthony Romero is about to call you get ready. And I was like, and that really opened an extraordinary opportunity to come and work with some of this country's greatest thinkers and advocates and lawyers and narrative change makers and organizers to look at how do we make an impact in this country for racial justice, for criminal legal system change, and for the protection of all of our civil rights and liberties. And to be able to join the ranks of this extraordinary institution has been one of the greatest honors of my career.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Amazing. I also want to ask too, going off of that is, you know, obviously I know a little bit about the Trone Center and ACLU National and affiliates and so forth, but some people might not. So **[40:00]** what is your focus at the Trone Center and also as a Deputy Legal Director at the ACLU?

**[Yasmin Cader]** So as one of the lawyers at the ACLU, all of us are committed to civil rights and civil liberties. We focus on 14 different issue areas from free expression and free speech to voting rights, gender justice, reproductive rights, disability rights. I could go on and on and on. In my Center, though, what we're focused on is racial justice, specifically, and including with a special emphasis on education and on health equity and on protection of civil rights tools. And then a bunch of different areas of the criminal legal system that we're seeking to transform. We focus on policing, bail practices, combating extreme sentences, combating the death penalty with systemic challenges as well as individual representation. We are focused on ensuring that those who are providers of abortion care and are at the other end of a prosecution have a lawyer and we help coordinate that representation and advise in that representation. We are also there for those who are incarcerated and conditions of confinement and combating those at every turn. So we do a lot. We stand up for public defense systems to ensure that they are meeting their Sixth Amendment, obligations, you know, it is a vast array of work. And I'm honored to be able to be a leader with others in this area as we march toward justice.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Amazing. As you mentioned, too, a lot of your work expands upon or like looks into or looks into to the intersectionality of the criminal legal system. Given my

participation in the seminar this semester with Schlanger, I kind of wanted to ask a little bit about like, what, I guess, what are some of the more pressing, I know this is a hard question, but some of the more pressing issues or issues that you were seeing that are becoming constantly more important to address in your role or in general?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Yes. Well, I would say, I mean, it's so important that we are ensuring that we are standing up for the Fourth Amendment and against racial profiling by federal law enforcement agencies, particularly in this moment of time when we're seeing the violation of people's humanity and their rights under the Fourth Amendment and the Fifth Amendment in so many contexts when it comes to ICE and Border Patrol's actions, so on the federal level. But there's more because there's policing and local policing, and that is an issue across this country, especially when the Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, really abandoned that work at looking at these institutions of law enforcement across this country where there were findings of them engaging in both discriminatory and violent excessive force cases and practices over and over again. So it's important that we step into that void when and where we can. There's just so much. I don't know where to stop. I could go on and on and on. But I think that the urgent issues of public defense and ensuring that public defender offices are funded fairly and in consistent way with the requirements of the Sixth Amendment, that spreads so vastly to so many people who find themselves at the other end of the government's finger and then issues of educational equity, particularly when the government is coming with unconstitutional and vague and discriminatory executive orders seeking to stop the teaching of history, right, and our complex and important American history and standing up for students and educators and communities in that in that context. Health equity. You know, we've had so many attacks on science, including science that is sound and important and consistent with the scientific method of which mandates that you look at the ways in which health care is not just applied, but is given in different communities. So, you know, there's a lot of work and I'm not, you know, we do it all. As Anthony Romero says, we cover the waterfront.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Yes. As you just told us, this work is, not intersectional. It's multifaceted. There's like a lot happening at all times. And there's a lot to, you know making sure that the fight is being carried out with intention. In that work, too, there's also this intersectional, multifaceted approach to doing so. What are some of the ways that you **[45:00]** and your role or your organizations or how do they work across just not only the ACLU, but across to the Public Defender's Office, other civil rights organizations, even communities?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Sure. Well, I mean, we have a national ACLU, but we also have individual affiliates and, in every state and some states more than one. And what's so important about that is that it is and it's a federated structure that enables us to be thinking of things from a global or national perspective, but then also having boots on the ground with local communities and engagement and leadership so that that we can work in a symbiotic way with each other to figure out where we should and can have impact. So I think that that's that that's what makes the organization so unique and powerful. But then there's also what muscles are you bringing to the fight? Right. We are extraordinary litigators, but then we also have extraordinary policy advocates. And then we also have extraordinary narrative experts. And then those who are focused on bringing that together in what we call a campaign, which just simply means an integrated advocacy effort where you're firing on all cylinders. together. And so the impact of

that is, is fierce. You know, I pity, as they say, pity the person who underestimates our strength and impact.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Speaking more about that too, one more thing before you kind of transition again, but I realized earlier, I asked you about a specific case, but do you have one looking over your career? I know, again, it's a very extensive career, but any case come to mind, any client interaction, anything that kind of speaks to you about the importance of this work and you carry that in your heart each day when you go into the office?

**[Yasmin Cader]** I'm not going to pick my favorite client because it's unfair. What I will say is being able to look at the world through the lens of my clients. And as you noted, I represented children. I've represented adults. I've done so in jurisdictions across this nation. I've been engaged with communities. I've been fighting against unconstitutional laws, but also discriminatory practices. And if I had to think about what has impacted me the most. It is the people who, again, gave me the honor and the privilege of standing up for them in their leadership. You know, we come from a country of heroes and of people who are warriors for justice. And when you can bring law and the rule of law to that fight, whatever it may be, you really are empowering what is the best of this nation. And so it has really, truly been an honor and a privilege and a sobering experience to really just see the potential, the human potential across this country from people from all walks of life and what we can do collectively towards justice. It's immeasurable. We just need to make sure that we dole it out and that we fight for it every day.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** That's great. That's totally fair. It's hard to pick a favorite client or a favorite case. So that was beautifully said that encapsulates all that you've experienced throughout your career. One more reflective question in terms of your career and just the impact that you've been able to have throughout your career is we kind of talked about what got you involved in the fight for racial justice, fight for civil rights and kind of what carried you through there. But what are, what is the way in which you're kind of, if so, your perspective or your mindset has shifted, not necessarily in a drastic way, but through all your experiences, how kind of have you come into the legal field one way and how are you kind of, you know, continuing to navigate through that now? What lessons have you picked up along the way?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I think I appreciate you noting like the layers of learnings that happen from all of the different experience, the different locales, the different cases, the different experiences, and what would be my perspective having that at my ripe old age now. I think one perspective I have is a belief in change, despite what we're seeing in terms of extreme rollback. You know, we talk about the arc of justice, and I think in some ways it's much more of a zigzag. But **[50:00]** I have never lost hope. I have been wounded by the reversals that we've seen and the lack of adherence to precedent and the kind of cynical rulings by so many. But I'm also empowered and hopeful from all of the jurists who have been courageous and continue to stand up for what they believe is right and what precedent shows us. And most importantly, the strongest emanation of our constitutional fundamental rights and foundations of our democracy. So I believe in what the structure is, the separation of powers, the federated nation that we have, the balance of the architecture of our democracy. I believe in it. I think it's sound. It just needs to be ignited with truth and with justice and with values. And I have a lot of hope and belief in the

American people, that we will get to a better place collectively that we will be able to hold and stand firm in that ground.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** I loved hearing your themes in terms of over the time you've developed more hope and more you see that there's ability for change. I think oftentimes right now people are experiencing the opposite. So it's very hopeful to hear someone in your position, someone from the front lines doing the work still has that belief. It actually segues perfectly into our last section, which are more big picture reflections, not necessarily your career specifically, but more so looking ahead. What would you advise a future incoming lawyer like myself or just in general, anybody about the field? So I want to first ask, what has inspired you and sustained you across the course of your career?

**[Yasmin Cader]** I really, for me personally, being a part of a motivated team of people that I am linking arms with and we're going into battle together and just, um, everybody playing their own part, but the whole being the greater than the sum of those parts, that's something that's really inspiring to me. So I look for that for me in a workplace environment.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Perfect. And you talked a little bit earlier about this just a second ago, your theory of change, but what is your theory of change when it comes to advancing full participation in our democracy? You spoke on it, but what are some things in which you're hoping that, us citizens of the United States were moving forward in the coming years and getting active and doing X or Y?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, I would say this term, for example, we have two important seminal cases before the Court, one on birthright citizenship, which was argued, was it last week? And which is really about who belongs. And then another seminal case, Callais, which is a voting rights case, which is: "Who can participate?". And when you think about the future, I have confidence we're going to win one, I'm hopeful on the other, but worried that we won't. And so we're going to have a lot of work to do to build a fertile ground for that justice, if it is something that is reversed upon, because both of those issues matter so much. We are a fabric of a society that stands on such a fundamental, important principles embodied in our bill of rights and in our constitution and in our Fourteenth Amendment. That Fourteenth Amendment alone promises, the fundamental embracement of what makes America unique and fabulous. And that is our immigrants. It embodies the concepts of equal protection. It embodies the concept of incorporation of these rights to not just protect us from federal government overreach, but from state government overreach. So it's there. We just need to fight for it.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Another question I also want to ask as well is, you know, we've been talking about the idea of intersectionality and how all these issues are multifaceted. I would be remiss not to acknowledge the intersectionality that you hold, as a Black woman. And how has that kind of shaped the ways in which you've not only moved through your legal career, but how do you think about and how you approach different issues and how you might bring those different, ideas and perspectives to the table?

**[Yasmin Cader]** Well, the extraordinary Jesse Jackson, I remember when he was running for

president the first time, and I remember going to hear him speak. And he talked about being himself a black man who was born in poverty, [55:00] who had seen a lot of injustice. But what perspective that gave him, as he said, life is a lot different from the bottom up than the top down because you get to see more. So I think that I feel very blessed and grateful for my identity and the shoulders that I stand on. And I also feel very motivated and just appreciative of all of the identities that make up the fabric of our country. So I really look to see what we have in common, which is so much, and celebrate our differences, because that's what makes it rich.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Yes. Love that. We are truly, I think I remember in, in like middle school, we used to say a melting pot. Then someone had said something else or like, we're more so like, I forgot what it's called, like a soup or a stew because you don't want to melt us down. You know, we still want to keep our differences.

**[Yasmin Cader]** That's right. That's right.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** One of the last questions I have posed, but I'll ask another general just overarching one, but one last one I have posed for you is what advice or pieces of advice would you give directly to aspiring civil rights lawyers in general about, what you've learned from your career, what they're going to have to battle up ahead as we are like you mentioned, there's a lot of these important cases are, you know, at the steps of the Supreme Court now?

**[Yasmin Cader]** I think it's really important to find where your magic sauce is. What is it that you love to do? Are you someone who is a writer and wants to have that time by yourself to just, perfect the art of written advocacy? Are you somebody that wants to be on your feet and engage with people and investigate and try cases? Are you somebody who wants to do a combination of both? What makes you sing? And don't feel that you have to be somebody that you're not or that you're supposed to. I mean, we want to be well-rounded lawyers, but follow your heart and don't try to over plan it. I meet a lot of young people who have the whole thing written out. You want to be able to bob and weave and ebb and flow with what the universe will bring you. So that would be a good piece of advice.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** That's well said. And then lastly, is there anything that you would like to talk about, you would like to speak on or anything you'd like to say that wasn't covered in my questions?

**[Yasmin Cader]** No, but there's one correction I would like to make. Okay. And that would be when I was talking about public defenders and my first starting at the public defender's office in Washington, DC, and one of my extraordinary mentors who I will never forget. And that is Kimberly Taylor-Thompson. I am standing on her shoulders every single day. She was one of my earliest mentors and is somebody who I emulate to this day.

**[Ku'Juana Quinn]** Amazing. Thank you so much. Thank you so much for your time.